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Assistant Secretary of State (1909-1913)

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Memorandum From Hugh S. Gibson to Philander C. Knox, November 12, 1910

Hugh Simons Gibson

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE.

OFFICE OF
THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY.

November 12, 1910.

Memorandum.

Dear Mr. Secretary:

In compliance with your instruction, I beg to report as follows in regard to the dissemination of information regarding foreign affairs by officers of the Navy and War Departments:

1st. Last month the papers were filled with alarmist rumors of an impending anti-foreign outbreak in China. Mr. Calhoun cabled that serious harm was being done by these rumors, for which there was no foundation in fact. The Department gave the members of the press to understand that these rumors were unfounded and that in the opinion of the Legation at Peking North China had not been so quiet for years. Several of the newspaper men thereupon told me that their information had come from the Navy and War Departments or persons connected therewith. For obvious reasons, they declined to give more definite information as to the source of their information. Mr. Miller prepared a memorandum on the subject at that time, a copy of which is hereto attached.

2nd. Since the beginning of the present troubles at Amapala, Honduras, various officers of the Navy Department have been giving to the press all information contained in confidential telegrams from the commanders of our gunboats at that port, information which they sought for the use of this Department and which was strictly in relation to foreign affairs. Some months ago, I believe this matter was taken up with the Navy Department and an understanding reached that any information transmitted by vessels on missions for the State Department or anyhow affecting foreign affairs should be given out only through this Department. On several occasions, information in

regard to the movements of troops and revolutionary bodies appeared in the newspapers, and it was very embarrassing to refuse the newspaper men information in regard to the Amapala situation and find that they had received the text of the Navy telegrams before the same were received here. Commander Hayes' long report on the situation at Amapala was given to the newspaper men before a copy was sent to this Department.

3rd. This morning a representative of the Associated Press showed me a despatch received from Fort Leavenworth, showing that the wireless station at that military post had intercepted your telegram to the President wherein you tell of the steps taken to maintain order, the arrest of incendiary editors, and of the rumor that Rodriguez is an American and not a Mexican citizen. The despatch adds that the operator could not catch the signature, but that the message was thought to be from you to the President.

It appears that this information is given out not only by the Secretaries or Acting Secretaries of the Navy but by various officers in the different bureaus and that there is no absolute control over the dissemination of news. This makes it very difficult to fix the responsibility for any specific leakage of information.

Frequently when information is not actually given to the press representatives by the War or Navy Departments, some Bureau officer there will let it be known that a telegram has been received on some specific subject and that the information it contains has been sent to the State Department. We are often obliged to decline to furnish the press with information concerning such telegrams and are embarrassed by misinterpreting our silence.

Gibson